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Titanic Struggle: Memory, Heritage and Shipyard Deindustrialization in Belfast

by *Pete Hodson*

Titanic Quarter is situated on former shipbuilding land on the eastern banks of Belfast's River Lagan, birthplace to hundreds of ships including the ill-fated Titanic. Titanic Quarter looks like a typical waterfront redevelopment project. Stainless steel and glass – the identikit symbols of civic modernity – dominate the urban landscape. (Fig. 1) For many visitors Titanic Quarter is synonymous with Belfast. The aggressive rebranding of this post-conflict, post-industrial city has strong political and economic dimensions. Titanic Quarter is supposed to alter international perceptions of Northern Ireland and shift domestic allegiances following the late twentieth-century Troubles. The 'new Northern Ireland' packaged and projected by Titanic Quarter is nonetheless out of step with social reality in Belfast.¹ Neighbouring working-class communities are subject to economic and cultural marginalization, something that Titanic Quarter entrenches rather than tackles. (Fig. 2) This article draws on the oral testimony of East Belfast workers and families with historic economic and emotional links to the Titanic Quarter site – Queen's Island, as they know it – to explore this shift. It foregrounds lived social experiences rather than deindustrial aesthetics.² Interdisciplinary methods are applied to gain a sense of the Titanic struggle over memory currently taking place in Belfast.

The first section traces the demise of Harland & Wolff shipyard, explaining how deindustrialization equipped Titanic Quarter developers with a 'pleasingly blank canvas' to reshape meaning and space in Belfast.³ The growth of Titanic Quarter relied (and if plans are realized still does) on shipyard contraction. The rundown of Harland & Wolff spanned from the 1960s until the final wave of mass redundancies around the millennium, when shipbuilding ceased in Belfast. The contraction of Harland & Wolff – for many years the most extensive shipyard in Europe – unlocked the land required for urban redevelopment. The processes of deindustrialization and urban regeneration are seldom analyzed together, despite their often symbiotic relationship. Responding to recent calls for integrated analysis, this article argues that state and corporate actors, who had a political, economic and cultural stake in Titanic Quarter redevelopment, willed the demise of Harland & Wolff.⁴

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Fig. 1. Titanic Belfast visitor centre, with the Hamilton dry dock in the foreground. Author's photo, December 2016.



Fig. 2. Goliath (left) and Samson (extreme right) H&W shipyard cranes. Billboard erected by Lower Newtownards Road Loyalist groups asserts the legitimacy of Protestant/Loyalist culture, specifically Orange Order parades. Author's photo, February 2017.

The second section examines the nature and purpose of urban regeneration in Belfast, from the formation of Laganside Development Corporation in 1989, to current Titanic Quarter initiatives and plans. Regeneration of urban space in Belfast was conceived in political as well as economic terms. The 'shared space' agenda at Titanic Quarter, though superficially positive, is laden with exclusionary class effects. Building on the work of Steven High and Jackie Clarke, it is argued here that regeneration at Queen's Island has accentuated 'working class invisibility'.⁵ In Belfast as in other cities grappling with the effects of deindustrialization, cultural rebranding has pushed 'the problems of urban decline out of sight and out of mind'.⁶ Communities that bore the brunt of shipyard deindustrialization now also endure socio-economic exclusion from Titanic Quarter. By and large, the new apartments and jobs on offer are beyond the reach of the local working class.

The final section discusses Belfast's rebranding as 'Titanic Town' and the centrepiece industrial heritage projects at Queen's Island. Oral history testimony exposes the discontent among 'stakeholder' working-class communities once reliant on shipbuilding, and what they make of 'their' history being used (and selectively reshaped) as heritage. Ex-shipyard workers' perceptions of the Titanic Belfast visitor centre raise troubling questions about the purpose of heritage in Belfast and who benefits from the process. Contentious narratives concerning Harland & Wolff have been systematically silenced by Titanic Belfast to create what is termed in this article, 'heritage memory'. Titanic Quarter reflects the state's preference for post-conflict reconciliation through forgetting. Nation-building heritage that 'reassures and reconciles rather than disturbs and divides' is the order of the day.⁷ The neutrality of heritage offerings, combined with discontent accentuated by regeneration and gentrification, casts a dark shadow over Titanic Quarter.

'YOU CAN'T CLOSE HARLANDS'

Shipbuilding emerged as one of Belfast's staple industrial sectors in the mid nineteenth century. The extensive area of reclaimed land known as Queen's Island, with its deep-water access to the Irish Sea and cheap labour, provided ideal conditions for industrial growth. Harland & Wolff (H&W), incorporated in 1861, became the dominant shipbuilding enterprise in the city: by the turn of the century it was Belfast's largest single employer and a key prop supporting Ulster's export-oriented economy.⁸ Shipbuilding is a highly volatile economic sector, prone to significant market fluctuations and periods of depression. The Northern Ireland Government, created in 1921 following the partition of Ireland, supported the local shipbuilding industry during times of stress. A strong political impulse underpinned this economic assistance for H&W. The workforce was overwhelmingly Protestant and supporters of the Unionist Party that dominated the new state. Shoring-up H&W reaped electoral dividends for the ruling Unionist Party in Belfast constituencies, largely neutralizing the threat posed by Northern Ireland Labour Party candidates.⁹ The importance of H&W for Unionist political

support continued, and perhaps intensified, during the era of deindustrialization that coincided with (and was obscured by) the recent Troubles (1968–98).

Memory in Northern Ireland is a tricky business. Two distinct and opposing sets of communal social memories and heritages exist. Collective (or national) memory is elusive. The two sectarian social memories are dominant, but by no means overpowering. Narratives shaped by other allegiances – such as class, gender, race and sexuality – also exist, though they are relatively subsumed. Post-conflict (1998), the clash between republicanism/nationalism and unionism/loyalism has shifted to the arena of culture, memory and historical legitimacy.¹⁰ As a cultural resource, memory possesses significant power and saliency in contemporary Northern Irish life and politics. Memory legitimates certain historical narratives and features prominently in so-called ‘culture wars’.¹¹ In contrast to the successful ‘Irish culture industry’, post-conflict loyalist identity is projected with far less confidence and evokes popular derision.¹² Contrasting with state-led heritage initiatives such as Titanic Quarter, alternative sites of memory expressed through murals, plaques and flags are commonplace in loyalist working-class areas.¹³ Here too the state is exerting influence by sponsoring Titanic-themed murals to displace sectarian and paramilitary imagery.¹⁴

Sectarianism lies at the core of the Titanic struggle over memory. Significant tensions exist, roughly following the Catholic/nationalist, Protestant/unionist contours that form the main cleavage in Ulster politics. Sectarian discrimination at H&W shipyard – both real and imagined – has deep historical roots and strong contemporary cultural resonance. Motivated by a potent mix of political and economic anxiety, expulsions of Catholic workers from H&W occurred at several points in the company’s history, most recently in 1970. The 1920 expulsions became the stuff of Belfast folklore, nowadays reproduced in the narratives of those with no direct memory or connection to the event. In July 1920, in the wake of severe sectarian rioting, 7,500 Catholics and socialist Protestants (dubbed ‘rotten Prods’) were driven from the shipyard.¹⁵ Jimmy Mitchell, a shipyard blacksmith, recalled in 2010 the expulsion of five hundred Catholic workers in July 1970. He expressed regret at not resisting collective pressure: ‘It’s hard to stand up against the likes of that. Especially when the mob rules, and it was a mob was going round telling everybody to get out’.¹⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that journalists later detected ‘quite a few chuckles coming from [nationalist] West Belfast’ when shipbuilding was in its death throes at the turn of the century.¹⁷

H&W remains a contentious historical topic. In 2010, the shipyard was selected as the proposed subject for a cross-community oral history project called ‘Voices from the Yard’. Belfast City Council provided funding and planning discussions continued for five months before ‘the project unexpectedly ground to a halt’.¹⁸ The issue of sectarian discrimination in the shipyard soured relations between republican and loyalist representatives.

Incorporating nationalist perspectives made loyalist community leaders fear that the shipyard – and its predominantly Protestant workforce – would be portrayed in negative terms. When discussing H&W, Protestants have more to defend, and more to lose, than republicans. Resolution was reached by changing the focus of the project ‘from the shipyard to “Loyalism in the 1970s”’.¹⁹ Paramilitarism was considered a safer subject, where loyalist memory could be captured on equal terms to republican memory, itself wedded to armed struggle and implicated in deadly violence.

My interviewees were recruited as part of a comparative project contrasting the impact of ‘aggressive’ state-led deindustrialization in the East Durham coalfield in the 1980s with the more ‘regulated’ decline at the Belfast shipyard. Twenty-three interviews were conducted in Belfast with twenty-seven individuals in a mixture of single narrator and group interviews. All narrators were formerly (and, in one case, currently) connected to H&W, ranging from management to manual trades. All interviewees were Protestant and twenty-three were male, reflecting the majority workforce composition. Nationalist shipyard perspectives were gleaned from newspapers and from three interviews stored at the Dúchas oral history archive in West Belfast.²⁰ Oral history in Northern Ireland is difficult because remembering can be dangerous. A powerful ‘instinct to say nothing’ is the legacy of the Troubles.²¹ To find willing participants proved troublesome, but ‘a refusal’, writes Anna Sheftel, ‘is not nothing. It is, itself, a story’.²² Paramilitaries maintain an active presence in post-conflict Belfast. Fears of repercussion and reprisal – and of words being twisted, removed from context and used as weapon – preclude more enthusiastic engagement with research projects, including my own. Trust was established incrementally and in some cases the dividend was interview consent. Some narrators were uneasy when confronted with printed versions of their testimony ‘in the raw’ and carefully scrutinized their words.²³ Others deleted risky sections, retrospectively opted for anonymity, or requested destruction of the transcript after PhD submission. Pseudonyms have been used for some narrators quoted in this article at their request.

H&W retained its Protestant character throughout the Troubles. Catholic recruitment and retention did not increase, even after the introduction of Fair Employment legislation in the 1970s.²⁴ The perception that H&W was not a safe working environment for Catholics acted as a deterrent. Shipyard trade unions also supported and sustained sectarian gatekeeping mechanisms ‘based around residence, family tradition and local informal networks’.²⁵ It should be emphasized that the sectarian element was not absolute. Nor was it unique to Northern Ireland, as it also featured in Glasgow and Liverpool labour markets.²⁶ Close trade-union control over recruitment ensured Protestant over-representation in Belfast’s engineering industries. Deindustrialization and the shrinking availability of industrial employment served to intensify sectarian gatekeeping practices. Some ex-H&W interviewees historicized shipyard sectarianism as something that

'happen[ed] in the [nineteen] twenties' and downplayed, or failed to recall, more recent incidents – such as the 1994 murder of a Catholic electrician.²⁷ Off the record, and over the phone, respondents were more candid about sectarianism (though strenuously denying their own involvement) and seemed torn between expressing pride in their job, and acknowledging darker issues at H&W.

In common with other UK (and, indeed, Western European) shipbuilders, H&W struggled against Far Eastern competition from the 1960s. H&W's perilous financial position required constant state financial intervention from 1966 to keep the liquidators at bay. Formal state ownership came in 1975, part of a wider British (Labour) Government strategy to nationalize the shipbuilding and aerospace sectors. H&W was excluded from the British Shipbuilders Corporation, created in 1977 to provide the industry 'with a decent burial'.²⁸ Recently released state papers reveal the carefully stage-managed nature of deindustrialization in Northern Ireland, which was tied to political and security considerations. The shock contraction policies imposed on other nationalized 'sunset industries' were not feasible at H&W.²⁹ Although the Troubles acted as a brake on shipyard rundown, political anxieties failed to bring the process to a complete halt. Deindustrialization advanced at a pace calculated to minimize confrontation.

The process and social memory of shipyard deindustrialization in Belfast is highly unusual. The shipyard was an important tool in the conflict, and was invested with varying meanings by different actors. For the British Government maintaining industrial employment was 'part of an overarching counter-insurgency strategy' and important for depicting commercial normality in Northern Ireland.³⁰ 'The fear is', wrote an *Irish Times* journalist in 1976, that 'rather than join the dole queues, they [redundant shipyard workers] will join such loyalist private armies as the Ulster Defence Association'.³¹ Protestants equated British shipyard support 'as a bulwark to the maintenance of the Union [of Great Britain and Northern Ireland]'.³² Working-class loyalists perceived rumblings about closure as 'an act of betrayal by Her Majesty's Government and a further step towards [British] withdrawal from the Province'.³³ Nationalists viewed the shipyard as a bastion of unionist hegemony and evidence of British economic partiality, favouring the Protestant community.³⁴ One nationalist commentator described H&W as 'a great bubbling mass of bigotry, and those gates are marked "No Fenians Here"'.³⁵ Considering the vexed symbolism of Belfast shipbuilding, its choice as the cultural icon for post-conflict reconciliation is striking. The Titanic's short lifespan (1911–12) allows redevelopers to intentionally elide difficult legacy issues, notably unsolved constitutional questions violently contested at the time of the ship's construction.³⁶

British political tolerance was stretched during the 1980s, when the economic agenda of the Thatcher Government clashed with peace-building

priorities in Northern Ireland. As early as 1982, the Government was convinced that

There are no economic or commercial reasons for giving H&W the further Government support necessary to keep it open... [but] the high and increasing rate of unemployment in Northern Ireland and the shipyard's symbolic importance to the Protestant community justify further support.³⁷

The Government was keen to divest itself of the 'grotesquely subsidized' H&W – but not at any cost.³⁸ Gradual financial strangulation 'without it becoming known publicly... and looking forward to the day when the political and economic situation in Northern Ireland may permit H&W's closure' was the adopted course of action.³⁹ In practice, this meant gradual rationalization of facilities and slimming down the workforce. For political purposes, it was important for the British Government to portray this slow death as one directed by the H&W Board and 'market forces', rather than 'deliberate government policy'.⁴⁰ In employment terms, the policy was a success. The workforce dwindled from 7,500 in 1980 to 2,400 by 1989, with limited protest and negligible political repercussions.

Tom King, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, advocated complete shutdown in early 1988. The Northern Ireland Office even went as far as to draft press statements announcing closure.⁴¹ Privatization enabled the state to extricate itself from H&W. A management-employee consortium joined forces with Norwegian shipping magnate Fred Olsen and bought the shipyard as a going concern in September 1989. Short-term contracts and outsourcing labour to external firms became the norm, as the Olsen-owned H&W diversified away from shipbuilding into offshore construction. Covert subsidy – and financial losses – continued throughout the 1990s. Completion of the last ships, and the final waves of mass redundancies, occurred between 2000 and 2002. In December 2018 H&W was listed for sale by Fred Olsen, sparking renewed fears about the long-term future of the yard and its remaining 150 workers. Warnings against a 'plunder' of industrial land by property developers quickly appeared in the local press.⁴² The full implications of the sell-off remain to be seen.

The context in which deindustrialization occurred affects how narratives of job loss are shaped in social memory. The temporal proximity of recent shipyard redundancies, infrastructure demolition and the growth of Titanic Quarter has resulted in strong connections between memories of job loss and perceptions of urban regeneration. Many shipyard workers feel that they lost their jobs *because* of Titanic Quarter, and draw direct links between privatization, redundancy and regeneration. Put succinctly by one ex-welder, 'he [Fred Olsen] seen seven square miles of real estate, and they [the British Government] give him it for a song and he run the place down'.⁴³ Some ex-employees believe that Olsen deliberately contrived to

make the shipyard uneconomical, in order to pay off workers and profit from regeneration. Former draughtsman Brian Lister, reflecting on H&W's struggles to secure orders in the early 2000s, said: 'I would be cynical – I'll tell you how cynical. A colleague of mine said: "You couldn't get Harlands to be as bad as it was unless you were trying"'.⁴⁴

H&W's continued existence – writ large by two listed yellow gantries – is problematic. Seldom used but still operational, Samson and Goliath have been co-opted as symbols of Belfast's cultural reimagining and are marketed as tourist attractions in their own right.⁴⁵ Shipbuilding may have ceased in Belfast, but the company indelibly linked with the industry remains active as a structural engineering and ship repair firm. Titanic Quarter historicizes an industry that is still extant, provoking disquiet at H&W. According to one current employee:

It's not good for our commercial side of things. . . My son was home from university one time and had a group of his friends on the tour, and the guy started and was doing the whole thing driving past the shipyard 'Which is closed now and it's not working any more, and it's shut'. And my son shouted in a loud voice: 'That's funny, because my mummy goes to work there every day!'⁴⁶

The tensions between heritage and living industry are readily apparent. The success of the former relies on the discursive eclipse of the latter. 'Pastness' is the marketable commodity at the heart of heritage projects; 'predicated', argues Jackie Clarke, 'on a not unproblematic assumption that the industrial world is dead and gone'.⁴⁷ The coherence of industrial heritage is instantly problematized when the past continues to challenge or haunt the present.

Social memories attached to H&W are of crucial importance for understanding the tone and character of Titanic Quarter, and East Belfast perceptions of the enterprise. Landscape change and new cultural narratives have hidden, but not erased, contested social memories of Belfast shipbuilding. Deindustrialization and urban regeneration are often umbilically linked. To rework Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison's well-worn maxim about deindustrialization, regeneration 'does not just happen'.⁴⁸ It is the outcome of deeply rooted structural economic shifts, driven by corporate and state actors, and laden with the social memory baggage of those with lived experience of the process. Tracing the slow demise of H&W provides a much more rounded picture of the forces at play, and the reasons behind Titanic Quarter's narrow focus. In academic analysis, there is a pressing need to re-connect the symbiotic processes of deindustrialization and urban transformation.

URBAN REGENERATION IN BELFAST: BUILDING 'TITANIC TOWN'

The Troubles delayed Belfast's urban reimagining and deeply affected its character. Belfast's choice of civic symbol and place marketing is unusually

reductionist. For the contested shipbuilding industry as a whole to be turned into the post-conflict, post-industrial civic icon posed substantial risks. One ship, one narrow slice of time, and one carefully controlled narrative created sufficient safe space to conjure the image of the 'new Northern Ireland', outside of sectarian divisions. This section discusses how Titanic Quarter was constructed, in a material and cultural sense.

In the early 2000s, Queen's Island was trapped in a curious limbo. The end of the shipbuilding era was reinforced by widespread demolition, but post-industrial economic regeneration seemed distant. Deindustrialization provided both the stimulus and inspiration for many urban areas to 're-brand as places to be consumed' and to reshape civic identity.⁴⁹ A strange paradox is usually evident. Municipal leaders, on the one hand, are keen to consign the industrial era to history and emphasize the forward-looking character of the city.⁵⁰ They also tend to utilize its historical (usually industrial) cultural imagery as the raw materials for civic renewal, and discursively to reproduce what has been torn down.⁵¹ Liverpool, for instance, draws cultural inspiration from maritime trade; Sheffield from steelmaking and, most recently, Belfast from the Titanic. The result, argues Steven Miles, is that 'place marketeers often end up using a universal vocabulary that robs a place of its individuality'.⁵²

Titanic is a global story, in no short measure due to James Cameron's hugely popular 1997 film. Millions of people are aware, even tangentially, of the basic narrative of the unsinkable ship and the human disaster that unfolded in the icy North Atlantic in April 1912.⁵³ Titanic is commercially lucrative. As the birthplace of the ill-fated liner, Belfast possesses a unique link. Visit Belfast, the council-sponsored tourist information bureau, strongly emphasizes this authenticity: 'Only in Belfast can you trace the Titanic story to its source, discover the passion and pride of those who designed and built her and relive the excitement of the Titanic era when the city was at the height of its powers'.⁵⁴ The cultural power of the Titanic also offers important political opportunities in Northern Ireland. The ship has been simultaneously portrayed as both distinct from – yet enmeshed in – Belfast's controversial shipbuilding industry. The Titanic's short lifespan provides useful cover for a narrow chronology (1911–12), which skirts around troubling historical issues at the shipyard. Redevelopment often involves a degree of historical 'amnesia', argues geographer Mike Crang, 'in order to "market" it'.⁵⁵ Titanic-themed regeneration in Belfast is a stark example.

Titanic Quarter is nakedly political, by striving to be apolitical. In Northern Ireland, polarization along ethno-sectarian lines remains firmly entrenched, reified by demarcation of symbols and urban space. 'Belfast', laments Titanic Quarter publicity literature, 'is a divided city. The city is to all intents and purposes segregated, with eighty per cent of the population living in sectarian neighbourhoods. Titanic Quarter, like Liganside before it, offers politically neutral neighbourhoods'.⁵⁶ In a divided society like Northern Ireland, providing an environment for cross-community

residential and recreational space is difficult to fault. But Titanic Quarter is nevertheless problematic in that the people who live, work and play there – tourists and the middle class – are not the core demographic that most require such civic spaces. Belfast's working-class districts still exhibit insular tendencies, some twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement. Peace walls which physically segregate Catholic and Protestant districts are still a feature of many communities. Working-class community shared space is elusive.

Creating shared space has been a government aim for thirty years.⁵⁷ Lagside Development Corporation (LDC) mirrored the ambitions of other urban development corporations established in Britain during the 1980s.⁵⁸ LDC aimed 'to transform not just the environment of a large part of the city but the international perception of Belfast itself'.⁵⁹ Unlike, for example, Trafford (Manchester) and London Docklands corporations, LDC had the added burden of twenty years of communal strife and associated negative publicity with which to contend. As acknowledged by LDC, 'Belfast is no ordinary place in which to undertake urban regeneration, and yet making Belfast an ordinary modern compact capital city was part of the task'.⁶⁰ Stressing Belfast's ordinariness became a foundational aim. Urban beautification and economic regeneration could erase the stain of the Troubles and allow Belfast to flourish as merely 'another' UK city.

LDC was wound-up in 2007, having regenerated two miles of riverside land creeping up to the southern flank of Queen's Island, where the Odyssey arena stands. Queen's Island regeneration plans had been in existence since the mid 1990s. Despite owning a working shipyard on the site, Fred Olsen took a keen interest in the redevelopment of Queen's Island: a process that would usher his shipyard out of existence. In my interviews, several ex-workers spoke of their alarm at seeing publicly displayed scale models of future regeneration which showed no trace of the shipyard. Such was the workforce furore that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners 'had to go over and like drape it [the model] with cloths or something to hide what they were perceiving was going to happen in the future'.⁶¹ H&W was literally being wiped off the map.

Against a backdrop of 2,000 shipyard redundancies and mass demolition of facilities, around the millennium Dublin-based Harcourt Developments emerged as the lead developer at Titanic Quarter. Tellingly, in 2002, the company's Chief Executive 'declined to speculate... on the future of the 150 year old shipyard within the new development, but insisted that Titanic Quarter was not benefiting from the demise of Harland & Wolff'.⁶² Land transactions at the time suggest otherwise. Fred Olsen created real-estate holding company Ivywood Properties, and sold leaseholds for parcels of Queen's Island (owned by Belfast Harbour Commissioners) to Harcourt Developments.⁶³ In my oral history interviews, the phrase 'land grab' featured prominently. 'Olsen', argued ex-plater Harry McFarland, 'wasn't interested in the yard. He was interested in the Titanic Quarter'.⁶⁴

A 'regeneration frontier' is evident, roughly demarcated by the Belfast-Bangor railway line.⁶⁵ The eastern edge of Titanic Quarter sits alongside the Lower Newtownards Road, one of the most economically deprived wards in Northern Ireland. Economic inactivity in Belfast is the highest of any major city in the UK, and average weekly wages are the lowest.⁶⁶ Steven High has described the process of deindustrialization and urban regeneration as a 'one-two punch' – the first punch being job loss, the second being a combination of social cleansing and economic marginalization as deindustrial sites are gentrified.⁶⁷ This has occurred at Titanic Quarter to the extent that it creates exclusion, in a class sense, as much as H&W did in a sectarian sense. Despite the boosterism of redevelopers, Titanic Quarter has delivered only limited economic improvement for neighbouring working-class communities. Some commentators have argued that the benefits simply do not exist.⁶⁸

Continued economic deprivation is perhaps the strongest factor in academic ambivalence towards Titanic Quarter. John Bronte has argued that regeneration 'has placed a veneer upon reality, extending the gap between the official packaging of Belfast and the lived reality of the majority of the city's inhabitants'.⁶⁹ Bree Hocking suggests that Titanic Quarter has merely 'paper[ed] over...the economic realities of deindustrialization'.⁷⁰ In particular, there is widespread anger that working-class jobs stripped away by the demise of H&W were not replaced. East Belfast community groups formed 'Titanic Watch' in 2007 amid growing concern that Titanic Quarter 'will not be integrated with the local community or create opportunities for local people'.⁷¹ Their predictions appear to have materialized. One ex-shipyard worker stated: 'To be honest with you, the ones that own it, I think, are more interested in getting rent off flats, and science park, things like that there...they're going to turn it just into a residential area, and turn the dock into a yacht marina. Where does that give jobs?'⁷² Inner East Belfast has seen few knock-on benefits from the thousands of visitors who flock to Titanic Quarter. Interviewed by Graham Dawson, one Lower Newtownards Road shopkeeper complained that 'tourist buses go about here, they slow down at the murals, click click click click click, but they don't stop'.⁷³

Deindustrialization has a 'half-life'.⁷⁴ Like many deindustrializing areas, in East Belfast there is a time-lag between deindustrialization as an economic process, and cultural acknowledgement of changed circumstances. Conducting research among young Protestant men in the early 2000s, Anne Green and her colleagues noted that 'many still hoped to follow the career paths that were open a generation ago but which had since been closed'.⁷⁵ Young working-class Protestants retain a strong work ethic and possess career plans – but these, in an era of fewer industrial jobs, often fall short of the hopes entrenched by historic cultural expectations.⁷⁶ Put simply, some young Protestant men 'are left clinging, sometimes desperately, to traditional and out-dated notions of "doing masculinity"'.⁷⁷ A related, and worrying, legacy is the 'long-term undervaluing of educational

achievement'.⁷⁸ Relatively easy access to industrial jobs, so the argument goes, resulted in working-class Protestant ambivalence towards education compared with Catholics. Whilst this argument is taken too far by some commentators, it is clear that working-class Protestant educational underachievement has persisted.⁷⁹ Four out of the five lowest-achieving wards in Northern Ireland are Protestant.⁸⁰ Although Catholic working-class districts remain top of unemployment league tables, the gap with Protestants has narrowed. 'Equity of immiseration' between working-class Protestants and Catholics is emerging.⁸¹ A sense of despair, evident in oral testimony, gives credence to the view that working-class Protestants 'are now being put to the bottom of the heap'.⁸²

Titanic Quarter itself is far from cohesive, nor is it completed. Scattered listed buildings, new office spaces, apartments, brownfield land and light industrial units preclude any sense of a 'connected landscape'.⁸³ Regeneration is work in progress. If redevelopment plans are to be fully realized, H&W must cease trading. The building dock – an integral part of H&W's current operations – features prominently in artist's impressions as a leisure boat marina. The company is being erased from imagined future landscapes. Despite widespread demolition and regeneration activity, attachment to deindustrial space and place remains strong among ex-shipyard workers. Landscapes are 'texts' that can be read differently by social actors.⁸⁴ Queen's Island is a 'storehouse of memory'.⁸⁵ Ex-H&W shop steward Jackie Pollock described how: 'when anybody goes down that hasn't been down in ten years – I've seen grown men cry when they go back down, they just see barren land, an odd hotel here and there'.⁸⁶ Fred Hoskins, who worked at H&W between 1979 and 1996, said: 'I still to this day go down, you know, like a moth to a flame? If I'm passing – I'll go in, you know? Just to see what it's like'.⁸⁷ 'Naming', writes Derek Alderman, 'can be used as a tool of control, a means of inscribing and reifying certain cultural and political ideologies'.⁸⁸ For ex-H&W workers, it is still Queen's Island, replete with a 'time-thickened' identity – not Titanic Quarter.⁸⁹ Refusal to adopt the Titanic Quarter name is an act of resistance against hegemonic power. As Denis Byrne argues, 'no amount of official surveillance or suppression can control meanings people give to places'.⁹⁰

TITANIC STRUGGLE: MEMORY AND HERITAGE AT QUEEN'S ISLAND

Titanic Quarter is not short of academic critics. The assessments of historians, geographers, architects, industrial archaeologists and sociologists have ranged from disapproval to outright hostility and condemnation. For those versed in heritage studies, familiar themes emerge. Questions abound about the use and abuse of history, commercialization, lack of local democratic accountability and the disparity between past 'reality' and manufactured heritage atmosphere. But academic assessments, to date, have not explored local social memory. In contrast, by applying oral history techniques, it is

possible to expose the extent of memory- and myth-making at Titanic Quarter. The narrative of Belfast shipbuilding articulated at Titanic Belfast stands awkwardly askew with the memories of those with direct experience of H&W. The result has been a profoundly critical reaction (or 'heritage dissonance' to adopt the framework used by Gregory Ashworth and colleagues) from the very communities Titanic Belfast purports to reflect.⁹¹ A struggle over memory, symbols and space is taking place.

Public history and heritage studies is a burgeoning research field, the development of which can be traced to the 1980s and the 'somewhat cranky' assessments by critics such as Robert Hewison.⁹² The creation of any heritage 'potentially disinherits'.⁹³ Co-opting history and memory, and transforming it into heritage, involves 'treading on someone's dreams and memories'.⁹⁴ Every heritage enterprise, be it state-engineered, or grassroots volunteer-led, creates critics hostile to the tone, character and direction.⁹⁵ Heritage is also actively contested by visiting publics, who are not passive receivers of history. Interpretation is not completed by the installation of display galleries, but subject to an ongoing process of co-creation, rejection and reshaping.⁹⁶ Titanic Belfast, nonetheless, stands out in terms of the extent and intensity of the rejection.

Reluctantly, conscious of yet more labels fogging up memory studies, I want to introduce the concept of 'heritage memory' to explain processes underway at Titanic Quarter. 'Heritage memory' reflects the selective and future-facing impulse of heritage, as a locus of unifying 'invented traditions' and resources to reshape public consciousness.⁹⁷ 'Heritage memory' is as much about reception as projection. Memory work with visiting publics exposes the tension between what is delivered, and what is remembered and accepted. Against a backdrop of Troubles-era antagonism, the usefulness of creating – and embedding – shared 'heritage memory' for political elites in Northern Ireland becomes clear. Titanic Quarter is an intrinsic component of the wider, post-conflict, 'attempt to build consensus and thus "thin" narratives of the past'.⁹⁸ This section questions whether forgetting, and turning 'antagonists into consumers', offers the best route to reconciliation.⁹⁹

Titanic Belfast is the glamorous centrepiece of Titanic Quarter. The striking bow-shaped stainless steel building looms large in Belfast's publicity literature. Identifying the 'key benefits' for Belfast, a 2008 report emphasized the opportunities for 'increased civic pride' and 'increased community integration through the creation of Titanic Belfast as a neutral shared space'.¹⁰⁰ Titanic Belfast was constructed with public-sector financial help amounting to almost eighty percent of total costs.¹⁰¹ Opened amid 'frantic fanaticism' surrounding the centenary of the Titanic's sinking, the visitor centre (note, not museum) captured international press attention.¹⁰² The then First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, formally opened Titanic Belfast in March 2012. In a speech to the assembled press corps, McGuinness stated: 'these buildings...are being used to write a new history, a better

history'.¹⁰³ The political undercurrents driving Titanic Belfast were never more clearly articulated. Writing a 'new history' meant, by implication, discarding the old.

The exhibition galleries at Titanic Belfast have received particularly fierce academic censure. David Coyles has argued that failure to grapple with shipyard sectarianism and acknowledge Protestant cultural links to H&W amounts to a 'censoring of history'.¹⁰⁴ The spectre of conflict is absent, sacrificed in order to create a new 'commercial memoryscape'.¹⁰⁵ Rodney Harrison reminds us that 'heritage is primarily *not* about the *past*, but instead about our relationship with the *present* and the *future*'.¹⁰⁶ 'Heritage memory' anticipates a desired historical consciousness that has yet to materialize. Titanic Belfast serves this purpose, by selectively enlisting certain themes and jettisoning others. Similarly, discussions of deindustrialization and the impact of shipyard redundancies on East Belfast are entirely absent. Indeed, such narrow focus on Titanic serves to 'obscure the processes of historical change' more broadly, something that afflicts many industrial heritage sites.¹⁰⁷ While labour techniques are discussed, and the ordinary worker foregrounded, the latter's narratives remain oddly obscure, as if hiding in plain sight. Paul Devlin has argued that the overall effect has been to 'de-narrate working-class experiences and heritage'.¹⁰⁸ Titanic Belfast is not unique in this respect. Beamish Museum in North East England has been criticized for portraying coalfield communities as a 'people without politics'.¹⁰⁹ Titanic Belfast explains the fate of the ship, but not that of the shipyard. 1912 is both year zero, and the chronological end-point of historical analysis.

More broadly, academics have condemned what they see as the 'shameless monetization' associated with Titanic Quarter. 'Publicly', argue Stephen Brown and colleagues, 'nobody wants to rock the boat. Show me the money is the only show in town'.¹¹⁰ While this might be true of political and business leaders, working-class communities in East Belfast have been vocal in their condemnation. H&W is an important marker of East Belfast Protestant identity despite its much-diminished economic value to this community.¹¹¹ Shipyard labour aided constructions of the working-class Protestant sense of self, and remains a source of pride. In current popular debates, Protestants are criticized for having too narrow a sense – or a complete lack – of culture and identity.¹¹² Cultural ownership of the shipyard and Queen's Island has been removed from this community. Intriguingly, however, oral history criticism of Titanic Belfast has argued not that it has been 'decommissioned as a Protestant space', but that it is divorced from *labour* skills and identity.¹¹³

Titanic Belfast was viewed by most ex-shipyard interviewees as inauthentic and too narrowly focused. Several narrators expressed discontent at its reliance on virtual reality interpretation. Dependency on digital aids and immersive experiences (such as Titanic Belfast's indoor cable-car ride around a virtual reality slipway) is typical of the 'experiential complex' of

late-modern museum sites.¹¹⁴ For ex-H&W workers, the craft element of skilled shipyard trades is an important missing component. Maurice Davies, a former H&W storeroom worker, opined ‘what I would love to have seen was, if they’d kept a couple of original sheds like the blacksmiths or the joiners, and they would have people – like in the Folk Park in Omagh – doing traditional crafts’.¹¹⁵ Ex-H&W manager, and local historian, Tom McCluskie echoed this sentiment:

What saddens me is that the heritage we had has gone. The Engine Works have gone. The yards themselves have gone. The history is gone. It’s only a facsimile now of what was left. I wanted to keep the infrastructure – certain parts of it – so people could come along, later generations and see how the men *did* the thing. If you go to Titanic Belfast you get a Disneyesque view of it, and it’s not accurate... But I don’t feel proud of what I see down here because it’s not right. It’s not a tribute to the skills of the people who made Harland & Wolff what it was.¹¹⁶

The performative and commodifying impulse of heritage has also produced dissonance. Titanic Belfast employs Edwardian-costumed guides to convey the ‘authorized heritage discourse’, loosely based on shipyard anecdotes.¹¹⁷ (Fig. 3) During regeneration planning stages, consultations ‘highlighted the opportunity for ex-shipyard workers to be trained and employed as curators/guides who will be able to provide a valuable insight for visitors into life as a ship builder in more recent times or recount older stories of Titanic and the city’.¹¹⁸ This has not occurred. Discussing a recent visit to Titanic Quarter, Fred Hoskins, a former shipyard painter, powerfully described his unwillingness to have his memories recycled for tourist consumption, and the feeling that Titanic Belfast offers sanitized history:

The guy who manages it come over and said: ‘Did you work down here?’ I said: ‘Aye’. ‘Did you work in that [Hamilton dry] dock?’ ‘Yes’. He says: ‘I’ll bring you this girl – would you tell her what happened down there?’ I said: ‘Who’s this?’ ‘Well she’s a tour guide. She’ll be able to tell all the tourists’. ‘Fuck off.’ You know? Fuck *off*. There’s no way you’ll get those memories that cheap. You know? There’s no way. What’s missing down there is – and I don’t particularly want to do it – I’m not looking for jobs down there, you know, me with the cap on, sort of: ‘What about ye’. Because that’s what they’re looking for down there... ‘Top of the morning to you, sir’. You know? ‘Back in 1912’. You know? I’m seeing things, there’s a tour now where you take people round the houses in East Belfast, you know, and they’re bringing them round as part of the shipyard tour. ‘This is where they used to live’. They’re not going to tell you about the woman who was beat to a fucking pulp by her husband who come home on a Friday night because she didn’t have her make-up on.



Fig. 3. Edwardian-costumed guide presents a 'living history' talk for ex-shipyards workers at Titanic Hotel's opening event. Author's photo, September 2017.

That's what's missing. The raw, hard edge of Harland & Wolff is missing. It's a sugar cake effect down there, you know?¹¹⁹

Fred described his feelings with considerable passion; the incident had evidently been playing on his mind for some time. His comments expose the dilemma faced by former shipyard workers: their memories, if they are to be heard, require filtration and dissemination through Titanic Belfast. Fred's desire for a 'hard edge' to be incorporated into heritage interpretations would, he feared, be compromised by Titanic Belfast guides who would narrate 'softer', uncritically nostalgic performances. Fred adopted silence to combat his powerlessness.

Ex-shipyard workers' perceptions of Titanic Quarter are not universally negative. Narrators who had prospered, rather than struggled, after industrial redundancy tended to express more positive viewpoints. In contrast to Fred, who was paid off suddenly in 1996, Jim Thompson, a former draughtsman, left the company willingly in 1989 and enrolled at Bible College. Jim, who went on to work as a Protestant minister for many years, reflected:

I think it's amazing what has actually happened and what has actually taken place. I think I would have liked to have seen more happening, you know, more taking place? . . . It's even hard now to recognize – even where we're sitting now in PRONI [Public Records Office of Northern Ireland] – that this is where the Engine Works actually was, where I actually used to work. . . . You can't live in the past, you know? We've moved on. The shipbuilding industry as it was will never be the same again.¹²⁰

Jim, though proud to have worked for H&W, seemed content that Belfast's shipbuilding era had ended and saw Titanic Quarter as a means of respectfully 'moving on'. Yet even in his more positive assessment the sense that the pace of spatial change is unsettling is noticeable, as is his acknowledgement that more needs to 'happen' before he considers regeneration a success.

Some nationalists too, though far less culturally invested in H&W, feel disenfranchised. Brian Feeney, an *Irish News* columnist, called Titanic Belfast 'an attempt to airbrush history'. Although he feels that 'nationalist Belfast has no connection with the Titanic', he contends that 'most people have just kept quiet because they are aware of the attempt to create a new Belfast, attract visitors, tourists and all the rest of it'.¹²¹ In some ways, negative consensus about deficiencies at Titanic Quarter has emerged among Protestants and Catholics alike. Both communities feel that heritage offerings do not speak to them. Asked if he saw himself reflected in Titanic Belfast, ex-welder Michael Hague stated: 'I don't even see why a tourist would go to it because what does it actually represent, you know? . . . Do something beneficial instead of ripping people off and charging £14 to go up and down an escalator'.¹²² The issues of representation and working-class

socio-economic benefits are captured in this response. Titanic Belfast alienates on multiple levels.

Created in 2008, Titanic Foundation Limited (TFL) is a charitable trust with the aim of cultivating Titanic Quarter as a maritime destination and facilitating social outreach. Titanic Belfast is accountable to TFL, which is responsible for discharging some of the local community engagement duties that the tourist-orientated Titanic Belfast fails to deliver. In their tenth anniversary report, TFL acknowledged that ‘more needs to be done to re-animate the public realm’ and highlighted the ‘risk that the destination is regarded as an expensive tourist spot and not for locals’. TFL also recognize the need to capture intangible heritage through the medium of oral history, and not just concern itself with material artefacts. ‘We must continue’, the report insists, ‘to engage with these communities to capture these stories before it is too late.’¹²³ However oral narratives rarely align with the Titanic Quarter ethos and are often highly critical of the project and direction. Having completed a brief internship with TFL in 2015, I got the impression that sustained engagement with community groups came a distant second to development of the Titanic Quarter destination brand. But only by listening and acting upon discontents can sceptical narratives and perceptions be challenged.

The only substantial shipyard building to survive the wrecking ball in the early 2000s was the former H&W Main Offices. Vacant and decaying since abandonment in 1989, the Main Offices reopened with generous Heritage Lottery Fund support (secured by TFL) as Titanic Hotel in September 2017. The transformation of the Main Offices into Titanic Hotel captures some quintessential heritage tensions. Economic repurposing of this last authentic nineteenth-century H&W structure was the only viable alternative to its demolition, but the exact form of the repurposing is deeply contested. Ex-shipyard workers felt that opportunities missed in Titanic Belfast could instead be fulfilled by the Main Offices. Brian Lister, who worked in the building in the 1980s, protested:

They’ve those two massive Victorian drawing offices crying out to be a maritime history museum. We’re the only UK city with a maritime history that doesn’t have a fucking museum. There are maritime history museums in places that don’t *have* maritime history!¹²⁴

Again, oral testimony suggests that history – as ex-shipyard workers see it – has been sacrificed at the brand Titanic altar. Former welder Michael Hague expressed this in particularly strong terms: ‘They’ve went in and they’ve raped and pillaged in that place, make no mistake about that. People have went in and took away the history’.¹²⁵

Titanic Hotel invited around two dozen ex-H&W employees to the opening ceremony. (Fig. 3) The feelings of ex-workers, captured in my field-notes at the time, exposes the collision between ‘heritage memory’ and social

memory, and the disorientating effects of navigating gentrified post-industrial space. The public areas at Titanic Hotel, stripped back to their Edwardian condition, were barely recognized by ex-shipyard workers. Ex-workers were escorted around the building by a guide, and listened (rather bemused) to two performances by costumed 'living history' actors recounting the atmosphere at H&W during the days after the Titanic's sinking. The tour ended with an inspection of a £350 per night suite. In my field notes, I wrote:

The view from the suite was one of the [shipyard] cranes and a deindustrial wasteland, and the Lower Newtownards beyond. (Fig. 4) Perhaps this hotel represents the most vivid illustration of middle-class 'ruin-gazing'. Nowhere in the building was there reference to why the Main Offices/Harlands reached this condition in the first place.¹²⁶

History has been telescoped at Titanic Hotel, as with Titanic Quarter in general.

Gentrification, writes Kirsteen Paton, 'invites wider participation but reproduces class inequality'.¹²⁷ Middle-class cultural, economic and social 'capital', she argues, is 'transmitted throughout [gentrifying] neighbourhoods' and used as a tool to rescue 'blighted' areas, and cultivate 'aspiration' among post-industrial working-class communities.¹²⁸ Yet working-class consumers are often priced out and displaced by the very regeneration that is supposed to benefit them. My field-notes also recorded my initial reactions (and tensions therein) to the 'heritagization' and economic exclusion evident at Titanic Hotel.

Demolition was the only alternative. It was a choice between complete erasure or partial obscuring – the latter is the lesser of two evils. This is probably the only time ex-workers can afford to stay/linger in the hotel. The building has been gentrified beyond their financial limits.¹²⁹

Ex-shipyard workers present at the opening echoed these sentiments. There was gladness and sadness about the enterprise – gladness that the Main Offices had been saved, but sadness that it did not properly reflect *their* working lives. By historicizing the shipbuilding industry to 1912, Titanic Hotel erases working-class social memory, in favour of clean – and comfortably distant – historical narratives. Gentrification secured the 'new rewards' of building preservation and aesthetic improvement, but brought also 'new injuries' – namely conditionality of access, tied to economic well-being, and narrow historical interpretation.¹³⁰

CONCLUSION

Titanic Quarter has sought to circumvent Northern Ireland's sectarian divide and establish not only shared space but also shared history. Civic



Fig. 4. View from Titanic Hotel suite, looking over the much-reduced H&W shipyard site towards East Belfast. Author's photo, September 2017.

leaders and heritage professionals are engineering a new civic consciousness for Belfast. By the same token they have ignored important tensions in the social memory of shipbuilding. The bandwidth has been narrowed and H&W's contested history, explored here in conjunction with Titanic Quarter redevelopment, has been sidestepped. But footfall and profit are not the sole metrics of heritage success. Listening and acting upon the sentiments of 'stakeholder' communities is vital.¹³¹ Heritage is not abstract; it is also the identity and history of individuals and communities. Titanic Quarter – for understandable yet regrettable reasons – fails to register and reflect social memory impulses. The result has been the construction of cultural (and economic) barriers between heritage-makers and the communities they purport to reflect. A democratic deficit exists.

Steven High and Fred Burrill have recently called for public historians to 'pick a side': to be an agent of gentrification and the erasure of working-class memory, or to pursue collaborative agendas which capture, reflect and project lived experiences, and instil a sense of self-worth in communities ruptured by deindustrialization.¹³² Industrial heritage museums are still, troublingly, obsessed with industrialization and community stability, rather than deindustrialization and transformation. Working-class people 'can speak for themselves' and curate heritage which they consider to be important, and critically reflect on themes often absent in 'official' interpretations.¹³³ Spaces, places and narratives do not have to be 'scrubbed clean' for tourist consumption.¹³⁴ A good example of democratic heritage and 'emotional regeneration' driven by (and for) deindustrializing working-class communities is the Durham Miners' Gala in the North-east of England.¹³⁵ At this annual gathering trade-union collectivism, community spirit and international solidarity are celebrated, not least in the parading of community funded banners.¹³⁶ While heritage dissonance has not been completely eradicated, the Gala allows communities that have experienced the trauma of 'economic violence' to reclaim a cultural sense of self.¹³⁷ In contrast to Titanic Belfast, where interpretation has been centralized and simplified, the Gala extends control to grassroots banner groups, and mobilizes industrial heritage as a 'resource for survival, and even a route out of the dead end that deindustrialization has seemingly constructed'.¹³⁸

To emotionally engage wider publics, Titanic Quarter requires 'messy' heritage that reflects lived experiences. As for the difficulties of 'doing' heritage and public history in Northern Ireland, interpretation need not be blandly neutral. The Museum of Free Derry, for example, is unashamedly partisan but has local (nationalist/republican) democratic accountability and resonance.¹³⁹ Enforced neutrality can stir deeper alienation, as this article has highlighted.¹⁴⁰ John Wilson Foster has argued, 'it is hard to gainsay or begrudge, at least for a time, a retreat from history into heritage'.¹⁴¹ The result at Titanic Quarter is that far from challenging bifurcated identities in Northern Ireland neutrality is entrenching them, and deepening divides by social class. Against a backdrop of ongoing

cultural, economic and social marginalization, it is time to reassess the character and purpose of heritage and public history in Northern Ireland. To quote Bill Rolston's memorable conclusion: 'The way to the future is through remembering rather than enforced forgetting, through display rather than whitewashing, through mature contestation rather than bland reconciliation'.¹⁴²

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ABSTRACT

Titanic Quarter has emerged as Belfast's premier tourist destination in recent years. This article examines ongoing regeneration efforts alongside the rundown of Harland & Wolff shipyard, which formerly occupied the Titanic Quarter site, and the delicate politics of Northern Ireland peace-building. East Belfast oral histories complement recently released state papers to analyze the intentions (and perceptions) of Titanic-themed urban transformation. The connected processes of deindustrialization, regeneration and industrial heritage are unpacked to better understand the cultural erasure and economic marginalization that can afflict displaced workers and communities. Lived social experiences have been largely ignored in heritage interpretations at Titanic Quarter in favour of non-contentious narratives serving the aims of state and corporate actors. Ultimately, the article questions whether attempts to create neutral 'heritage memory' tackles underlying divisions in post-conflict Northern Ireland.